

## Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1351  
INFO AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY  
AMCONSUL MONTREAL PRIORITY

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E.O. 11652: N/A  
TAGS: PINT, CA  
SUBJECT: BURNS' ILLNESS MAY SLOW PASSAGE OF REFERENDUM  
LEGISLATION

1. PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE HEARINGS ON THE PQ'S PROPOSED REFERENDUM LAW HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED DUE TO THE ILLNESS OF MINISTER OF STATE FOR PARLIAMENTARY REFORM, ROBERT BURNS. BURNS, WHO IS RAMRODDING THE REFERENDUM BILL FOR THE GOVERNMENT, WAS HOSPITALIZED MAY 19 AFTER SUFFERING WHAT APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN A HEART ATTACK. THE GOQ HAS KEPT MUM ON THE PRECISE NATURE OF BURNS' AILMENT, BUT HE IS BEING KEPT IN THE CARDIAC UNIT OF ST LUC HOSPITAL IN MONTREAL. BURNS' OFFICE HAS TOLD THE PRESS THAT HE WILL LEAVE THE HOSPITAL ON JUNE 1, BUT THAT HE WILL "CUT DOWN DRASTICALLY HIS WORK PACE," AT LEAST UNTIL SEPTEMBER.

2. IN ADDITION TO HIS MINISTERIAL DUTIES, BURNS IS ALSO THE PQ'S PARLIAMENTARY LEADER IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. THE MONTREAL GAZETTE, CITING SOURCES CLOSE TO BURNS, REVEALED TODAY THAT BURNS WOULD BE RELIEVED OF HIS PARLIAMENTARY DUTIES SHORTLY SO THAT HE CAN CONCENTRATE ON HIS  
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MINISTERIAL PORTFOLIO. SPORTS AND RECREATION MINISTER CLAUDE CHARRON HAS TAKEN OVER TEMPORARILY AS PARLIAMENTARY LEADER, BUT NO ONE HAS YET BEEN NAMED TO PINCH HIT FOR BURNS IN THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE ON THE REFERENDUM LAW.

3. COMMENT: BURNS' ILLNESS COMES AT A PARTICULARLY

BAD TIME FOR THE GOVERNMENT IN THAT THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE HEARINGS ON THE REFERENDUM BILL WERE JUST GETTING INTO HIGH GEAR. WITH THE REFERENDUM BILL UNDER HEAVY ATTACK BY THE OPPOSITION LIBERALS, BURNS' EXPERTISE WOULD BE MOST USEFUL TO THE GOVERNMENT SIDE. AS IT IS NOW, WITH THE COMMITTEE IN RECESS AND NO NEW LEADER FOR THE GOVERNMENT SIDE IN SIGHT, THE GOVERNMENT'S OBJECTIVE OF PASSING THE BILL DURING THE CURRENT ASSEMBLY SESSION ENDING JUNE 21 IS IN JEOPARDY. THERE IS SPECULATION THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL RESORT ONCE AGAIN TO CLOTURE TO SHUT OFF COMMITTEE DEBATE, BUT THIS WILL COST THE PQ DEARLY SINCE THE OPPOSITION IS NOT RPT NOT FILIBUSTERING BUT DEBATING THE BILL ON ITS MERITS. THE GOVERNMENT WOULD LOOK BAD IF IT HAD TO CUT OFF DEBATE SIMPLY BECAUSE IT WAS UNABLE TO GET ITS PARLIAMENTARY ACT TOGETHER IN THE ABSENCE OF BURNS.

4. AS WE HAVE REPORTED IN THE PAST, THE PQ IS UNDER SEVERE PRESSURE FROM WITHIN THE PARTY, AS WELL AS FROM THE OPPOSITION, TO GET ITS SOVEREIGNTY-ASSOCIATION PROPOSALS ON THE TABLE.

THE PRESENT PQ TIMETABLE IS TO PASS THE REFERENDUM LAW BEFORE SUMMER AND THEN LAUNCH THE PARTY'S INFORMATION CAMPAIGN ON THE REFERENDUM IN THE FALL. THE REFERENDUM ITSELF WOULD BE HELD IN THE SPRING OF 1979, UNLESS A CONCURRENT FEDERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN FORCES A POSTPONEMENT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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UNTIL SUMMER OR FALL. THIS SCHEDULE MAY NOW HAVE BEEN UPSET BY BURNS' ILLNESS.

5. BURNS HAS LONG FEUDED WITH RENE LEVESQUE AND OTHER PQ LEADERS AND THERE HAVE BEEN PERIODIC RUMORS THAT HE WAS ON THE WAY OUT. NEVERTHELESS, HE IS THE PARTY'S MOST ABLE PARLIAMENTARIAN (AN AREA IN WHICH THE PQ IS NOT WELL ENDOWED) AND, AS GODFATHER OF THE REFERENDUM BILL, HIS EXPERTISE WILL BE SORELY MISSED IN COMMITTEE. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT BURNS WOULD HAVE EVENTUALLY LOST ONE OR THE OTHER OF HIS POSITIONS. ALMOST CERTAINLY THIS WOULD NOT HAVE OCCURRED UNTIL AFTER PASSAGE OF THE REFERENDUM LAW. AS IT IS, THE REFERENDUM BILL IS NOW IN SERIOUS TROUBLE. MCNAMARA

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